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Presentation of the 57th Annual Report of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces, 26 January 2016

The Federal Armed Forces at a Turning Point

Today, I am presenting my first Annual Report as Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces. Of course, the Report also contains findings that go back to my predecessor, Hellmut Königshaus, who held this position until May.

I would like to present my Report under the heading 'Federal Armed Forces at a Turning Point'.

Why have we arrived at a turning point?

For 25 years, the Federal Armed Forces have been continuously declining in size. This was possible and the correct course to take following the end of the Cold War.

In 1990, there were almost 600,000 military personnel in West and East Germany, but since then the budgeted force strength of our Armed Forces has decreased as a result of several rounds of reforms, first to 370,000, then 340,000, 250,000 and most recently 185,000.

In fact, according to the Federal Ministry of Defence's official force strength report, there were exactly 177,000 active servicemen and women at the end of 2015. The Federal Armed Forces have never been smaller.

These personnel cuts have been accompanied by cuts to the Federal Armed Forces' materiel resources, and the latest reform even saw spending on materiel slashed back disproportionately. In particular, the Army is supposed to get by with 70 per cent of the resources it ought to have. And in recent times the stockpiling of spare parts has been regarded as uneconomic.

At the moment, this deliberate strategy of managing scarce resources poses a danger to the Armed Forces' training activities, exercises and deployments. Everything is in short supply.

If there is a serious will to restore our basic capability to defend ourselves collectively in Europe, the Federal Armed Forces, certainly at their current target force strength, will need to be fully resourced with materiel, from tanks to body armour, 100 per cent.

The good news is that modern, new equipment is coming on stream right now – but the bad news is that all this equipment is arriving late, with considerable delays, it is dogged by teething problems, and the volumes supplied are often too small, as well as being more expensive than originally planned.

Old ships are being retired from service before their replacements have even had their keels laid. Not to speak of weapons and munitions. The refurbishment of barracks and infrastructure is now making progress, but far too slowly.

It is my discussions with servicewomen and men, the petitions I receive and the field visits I make that have persuaded me to paint such a drastic picture of the situation. Our service personnel are fed up with the current state of affairs. Too much is lacking.

If training and exercises cannot be carried out because, for instance, vehicles, weapons and night vision goggles have been lent to other formations, or if just two out of 20 helicopters have yet again been cleared to fly, the troops' motivation is bound to suffer. After all, actually being able to do the job is one of the things that makes a career as a soldier attractive.

The Federal Armed Forces are needed – to perform their core function, which is to ensure Germany's external security. Domestic administrative assistance must be possible (and is also provided with tremendous dedication), but this must not evolve into a permanent task with incalculable consequences.

For years, there has been a trend for the number of servicewomen and men deployed abroad to go down, reaching 2,500 in the middle of last year. This figure is now rising again, in the direction of 4,000 or 5,000 in the present year.

Furthermore, there are the more than 5,000 personnel allocated to the NATO Response Force, plus the Baltic Air Policing operation, plus the Army companies rotating to Eastern Europe, plus the assistance for refugees. As far as manpower is concerned, some parts of the Federal Armed Forces have been, and are, at the very limit of their capacities, given the burden of deployments they have been having to shoulder. I welcome the fact that the Federal Defence Minister now wishes to have the forces' personnel concept reviewed. This review will also need to look at a number of perennial issues: the backlog of promotions, the appraisal system, the frequency of transfers and the amounts of time taken to process personnel matters – as well as questions vital to the forces' future such as why women so rarely apply to change their status from temporary-career volunteer to career soldier.

There are major gaps in some assignments with shortfalls of personnel, for instance command support, IT, electronics, marine technology and paramedics. Manpower shortages are being faced in these areas. Elsewhere, the structures in

place are not fit for purpose, and there are not enough established posts. The implementation of the EU Working Time Ordinance will make such deficiencies even more clearly apparent. Adjustments will have to be made: Let us move away from hollow structures!

I hope it will be clear why I am saying the Federal Armed Forces have reached a turning point. Further cuts are out of the question. The Federal Armed Forces must not be hostage to the vagaries of the public finances. The functions they perform are growing. The targets that are set and the reality of what is happening in the forces must not drift ever further apart, in terms of either materiel or manpower.

It should be noted that this does not imply a build-up of military strength. It means recognising deficiencies and closing gaps. Incidentally, it will also remain the right approach to take if we are to cooperate ever more closely at the European level.

Important stimuli have come from Germany's parliament during the present electoral term. After the successful launch of the campaign to make our Armed Forces more attractive, the government is now called upon to put forward a concept for action to close the gaps that exist.

There will also be price tags attached to any such concept. In 2015, the share of Germany's gross national product (GNP) devoted to defence was 1.16 per cent. This year, it will rise very slightly, by one hundredth of a percentage point. This is the right direction. According to the financial plan that has just been adopted, however, the share of GNP spent on defence is due to go down to 1.07 per cent by 2019. That is the wrong direction!

The Armed Forces' functions, structure, manpower, materiel and funding will all have to be reconciled. I believe our government and parliament are now largely aware of the problems that are being encountered here.

2016 could, and should, therefore be a watershed year for the Federal Armed Forces following the excessive cut-backs they have had to cope with: a year that sees their personnel, materiel and financial resources transformed.